

JEPHTHAH: A CHARACTER STUDY

The screen is dark. Several splotches of yellow-orange light focus into separate fires . . . campfires. Wind plays through the flames, scattering dust and debris through the area. The camera pans in on a group of men huddled around one of the campfires. Ancient Hebrew music plays softly in Dolby Stereo. The camera circles the fire. An open tent comes into view. Jason Momoa sits on skins spread across the ground. Armor and weapons are stacked behind him.

Candlelight illumines a face creased by war and drawn by the death of an only daughter. Yet, the gleam in his eye fights the candlelight for dominance. A sudden grin shifts some of the wrinkles near his mouth. He summons one of the two officers in the tent. After receiving his instructions, the young man leans down and quickly turns, leading the other man to the campfire. As orders echo across the camp, one soldier whispers to the officer.

"Shibboleth? Why that sly old bastard!"

From a cursory reading of Judges 10:6-12:7,¹ a biography of Jephthah, one of the twelve 'Judges of Israel,' can be constructed. This biography would fit nicely into the mold generally used to describe the warrior-judges of the Book of Judges. A closer look, however, would reveal a much richer and less holy character, one resembling the "sly old bastard," which could aptly be portrayed by Jason Momoa.

To describe and understand the character of Jephthah, his role in the history of Israel, and his canonical importance, the concept of "judge, as used in the book of Judges, must be investigated. The English word *judge*, as well as the Latin and Greek words used in the titles of the book of Judges (*Liber Judiwn* and *KPITAI*, respectively), imply a legal, judicial function. However, the Hebrew word *shophetim*, corresponding to the English judge, is used only twenty times as a verbal root and six times as a participle in Judges.² God is the only character in the book given the title *shophet* (11:27). Only nine of the twelve judges prove to have performed the function of *shophet*. The implication is that God alone is the true judge of the people of Israel, and the function of a legal representative of God is but one of the duties of those described as judges in the book of Judges.

Twelve judges are listed and fall into two categories: "minor" and "major." The "minor" judges, Tola (10:1,2), Jair (10:3-5), Ibzan (12:8-10), Elon (12:11, 12), and Abdon (12:13-15), are those described only by their name, their jurisdiction (birthplace/tribe), and sometimes the number of children they had. The only duty ascribed to them was that of functioning as a *shophet* for a certain number of years. The prevailing opinion of Biblical scholarship is that the primary

¹ All Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV). (Source: *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.)

² The Interpreter's Bible (TIB): Volume II. New York: Abingdon, 1953. (p.677)

function of these judges was a legal or governmental task. Whether this is due to confidence in the correct meaning and usage of the term *shophet* or is due, instead, to default is problematic and probably unsolvable.

In contrast to the "minor" judges, the "major" judges are considered "deliverers" or "saviors."³ As we saw earlier, one of the significant theological functions the book of Judges plays in the canon is in showing God's judgmental and saving nature. It is in developing this function that the need for a human deliverer is necessary. Judges is part of the "Deuteronomic History." In this "history," the historian shows that God should be viewed as the ultimate judge of the actions of the people of Israel. It demonstrates that God, and not some earthly king, is the perfect leader of the people. Through God, the people are delivered from the hands of their oppressors. This deliverance is contingent upon Israel's loyalty to God alone and their disavowal of all other gods. The redactors, in pulling together the individual narratives of the judges,⁴ set up a cyclic pattern used to deliver their message in no uncertain terms. This cycle, repeated several times in the book, is the format used in presenting the stories of each of the "major" judges.⁵

The cycle begins with apostasy, which leads to oppression by neighboring forces, resulting in servitude. This servitude leads to supplication by the people. Their pleas are heard by God, who sends them a deliverer who gains their salvation.⁶ From the story of Jephthah this cycle can be seen as:

1. **Apostasy**; "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the Lord, and did not serve Him." (10:6)
2. **Servitude**; "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the children of Israel that year. For eighteen years, they oppressed all the people of Israel that were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Ammonites, which is Gilead." (10:7,8)
3. **Supplication**; "And the people of Israel cried to the Lord, saying, 'We have sinned against thee, because we have forsaken our God and served Baals.'" (10:10) and
4. **Salvation**; "So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. And he smote them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramin, with a very great slaughter. So, the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. (11:32,33).

³ Tyndal Old Testament Commentaries (TOTC) (London: The Tyndale Press, 1968 (Judges commentary by Arthur E. Cundell)), 15.

⁴ TOTC, 18.

⁵ Note that the abbreviated story of Shamgor (3:31) is considered a major judge but does not follow the complete cycle.

⁶ TOTC, 18.

Again and again, the need for a deliverer, sent by God to rescue the people, is shown in Judges. It was the "major" judges that fulfilled the role of deliverer.

What manner of human beings were these saviors? Why did God choose these particular persons to be saviors of God's people? "A 'peculiar quality' characterized these men for their task as the deliverer.⁷ The best way to describe the quality is to call it "charisma." This charisma was usually manifested in two ways: military prowess or wisdom. "These men (and, of course, Deborah) possessed outstanding qualities of leadership which were conceived to be the result of God's spirit coming upon them. The more spectacular evidence of this possession, and therefore the most likely to be remembered by posterity, was the shattering of the yoke of an oppressor."⁸ Given their individual capabilities, and their faith in the power of God, the judges defeat the enemies of Israel. After the victory they continue in some capacity as judge or ruler over Israel. However, upon their death, the cycle starts anew.

The Deuteronomist as formulated the cycle of events into which he weaves the individual traditions. These traditions, some well-known, some obscure and tied only to individual tribes, are combined to tell the story of pre-monarch Israelite history. The mold is now formed and set. The "judge" is a chosen one of God; chosen to deliver God's people from the hand of their oppressors. They are godly persons, gifted with charismatic leadership qualities, military prowess, and above-normal "smarts." It is into this mold that we will try to stuff Jephthah!

When we are finally introduced to Jephthah in Judges 11:1, we are given the three personal characteristics that are the most important to be used in understanding his actions and importance as a "judge." "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a harlot." (11:1) Gilead needs a leader. (10:17,18) The leader to be chosen is an Israelite. He is a mighty warrior. He is also an illegitimate child; unwanted and disinherited by his family. What a combination! It is this character which the Deuteronomist must use in continuing his cyclic history.

This particular story comes from the tribe of Gilead. Gilead would have felt the danger of Ammonite oppression most keenly. Ephraim, Judah, and Benjamin may also have been attacked by Ammonite raiding parties, but Gilead would have felt the brunt. It was the elders of Gilead who, after eighteen of an all-out war. years of oppression (10:8) had to choose a commander to lead them. It would be natural for them to choose one of out of danger. What a choice it turned out to be! The most qualified leader around was that son of a harlot, Jephthah. His leadership and charismatic personality were well known to them, and the combination of eighteen years of oppression, and his charisma, was quite enough to make them swallow their

⁷ TOTC, 16.

⁸ TOTC, 17.

pride and finally entreat him to be their leader. (11:6) Jephthah had to be the man, sent by God, to save the people.

Jephthah, however, was no "knight in shining armor;" riding with the sons of nobles, vanquishing evil and righting wrongs. He was the bastard son of a Gileadite, kicked out of the family by his stepbrothers. (11:2,3) He was the leader of a raiding band of "worthless fellows." (11:3) This was God's chosen one? (As we have seen in God's past choices, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, for example, if God did have anything to do with choosing Jephthah, his "ungodly" characteristics would more likely show him as God's chosen," than his Israelite heritage, or warrior's valor."

When the Ammonites began their attack on the people of Israel, the elders of Gilead fetched Jephthah from his wilderness headquarters and began final negotiations. (11:5,6) They desperately needed a leader. Jephthah, realizing that he was "took full advantage of his situation. Not only would he be their commander in war, but he also demanded to be made their ruler after the battle. This is the point in which Jephthah takes on a status not given to the other "judges." He is here designated *qasin*. (11:6) This is translated as "leader" (RSV) or "captain" (AV), but, according to Arthur Cudall,⁹ *qasin* implies that Jephthah was being invited to be dictator for life. The Gileadite elders not only had to swallow their pride in accepting the illegitimate son as their commander, but they also had to give him unprecedented power over them. Jephthah used his charisma to his best advantage. He was now the undisputed leader of Gilead.

But was he "chosen of God?" If he was not, he damn well wanted the people of Gilead, and his enemies (11:27), to think he was. He, therefore, called on Yahweh as his strength (11:9b) and followed the elders to the shrine at Mizpah. There, he was the consecrated of God. His confidence was now at its peak, and he was ready to take on the Ammonites.

Jephthah immediately enters into the charade of attempting to reach a settlement with the king of the Ammonites by diplomatic measures. (11:12-28) This would have been normal procedure for common warfare in that time. It is in this section of the text that one of those ever-present exegetical problems in the Old Testament comes into view. The territory dispute described in Judges 11:12-28 refers constantly, not to the Ammonites, but, rather, to the Moabites.¹⁰ The god described in verse 24, for instance, is Chemosh, a god of Moab. There are also references to several Moabite kings and cities throughout the story. There are two explanations that I particularly lean toward. One is fairly easy to swallow and is consistent with our understanding of the method and history of the Deuteronomic redaction. The other is quite intriguing but much more problematic.

⁹ TOTC, 142.

¹⁰ TOTC, 143-145.

The most universally accepted version of the switch in reference to who the enemy actually was (Moab or Ammon), is probably the result of the state of historical knowledge at the time of the redaction. The editor could plausibly have had confusing and contradictory historical evidence with which to work. The mixed references would then be due to ignorance on the part of those who read these accounts since. Presumably, they would be using the same historical information that the redactor had used. The second possibility, one that I particularly like, is that the redactor purposefully switched the references as a way of describing Jephthah's knowledge and ability as a statesman.¹¹ As it will soon be shown, Jephthah's knowledge and understanding of his religion was lacking. In the same vein, should the disenfranchised leader of a band of no-goods be expected to know the history and method of discourse assumed in these passages? The fact that the king of the Ammonites "did not heed the message of Jephthah" (11:28) may be the result of his believing this upstart Gileadite to be an ignorant, arrogant fool.

The key theological issue in the story of Jephthah is focused on the relationship between God and the leader of God's people. The focal point of this relationship is the vow described in Judges 11:30, 31; "And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said: If thou wilt give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering." The Hebrew text does imply, at the very least, the possibility of human sacrifice. He presumably had in mind sacrificing anything from one of the domestic animals in the yard to one of the servants. His later reaction to seeing his daughter, however, makes it quite clear that he did not dream that he might have to sacrifice his only child.

Unlike many of the universally accepted Bible commentators,¹² I do not see the vow as being "rash" or "desperate." Nowhere in the text is there any evidence of desperation on the part of Jephthah. I believe, rather, that the vow was an ill-conceived "calculated risk." He simply did not take into account all the possible outcomes of his vow. For Jephthah, the vow probably served two major purposes. One was that it evoked the power of the God who presumably gave him his authority over the Gileadites. This would considerably impress the elders, and the people, who would then treat him as a "Prince of God" after his victory. Secondly, it was a terrific, but ignorant, hedge on his bet of faith. All warriors of his time would have covered all bases by entreating the favor of the local god before a battle. Jephthah's god just happened to be Yahweh, the God of his heritage. His faith in God would have consisted of relegating all unexplainable activities to God; a God who somehow controlled history in the outcomes of battles. Therefore, one did not take chances with God. For without his blessing you didn't win wars!

¹¹ TOTC, 144-145.

¹² TOTC, 146-147; *The Century Bible: Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (London: nelson, 1967), 231.

The nature and result of this vow can now be understood. It was an act of blind, virtually unreasoned, faith. It did not take into account that God had already shown Israel that human sacrifice was not desired by God. The story of Abraham and Isaac had made clear that human sacrifice was not required. It did show that loyalty was required. Loyalty would be something a leader of an army would understand. Blind reliance on his God is something that he would need only when the going got tough.

It is at this point that the Deuteronomist makes his strongest theological point. He now flatly states that "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah." (11:29) God chose Jephthah as the instrument of deliverance of the people. But, Jephthah does not know this God; the God striving to save the people of Israel. He knows only a god whose appetites must be satisfied before his power can be enlisted to fight against the enemy. Blind faith, void of understanding, is no good to either God or humankind. The result of God's love is the deliverance of God's people from the hands of the Ammonites. The result of Jephthah's vow is the death of his only child; an abomination to God (Mi 6:6-8), and a terrible blow to Jephthah. (11:35)

The emotional blow to Jephthah causes him to reflect on what he has done. Now, understanding enters into his faith. But, this reflection is forced on him. The only course he (and the redactionist) sees open is to fulfill the vow. It is here that the redactionist tries to redeem the story by including the tale of the daughter's reaction to the vow. She accepts a vow to the Lord as being unbreakable. Seeing her father's reaction, she knows that the consequence of the vow means her sacrifice. Yet, her faith knows that justice left in God's hands is true justice. Therefore, to carry out the vow is the only conceivable action she can take. The story told in Judges 11:37-40 is an aetiology of a long ago forgotten Gileadite lamentation ceremony.

To say that Jephthah is a changed man, after the tragic result of his vow, is to disregard the rest of the story, and to treat the character portrayal to this point much too casually. In fact, the reason why Jephthah goes through with the sacrifice of his daughter may not be fully explained by a new revelation of God's true nature and requirements for a faithful life. Jephthah loved his daughter. The sacrifice breaks his heart, yet he has two motives for fulfilling his vow. One is his fear of God's justice; the other is purely selfish. Disavowal would have given the elders of Gilead a reason to "dethrone" him. Jephthah, whose history of family ties is disastrous at best, would not have to think very long over the choice between the life of his daughter and the continuation of his own personal empire. By fulfilling the vow, it would allow both God and Jephthah's empire to win.

The final episode in the story of Jephthah adds credence to the biography drawn to this point. In this story, Ephraim, another tribe of Israel, becomes jealous of Jephthah's victory. They threaten war and are wiped out. The method Jephthah uses, and the extent of the massacre, both reemphasize traits already seen in him. One is that a sense of kinship, whether it be in

relationship to his daughter, his family, or his "people," is not one of Jephthah's strongest drives. Secondly, it is again obvious that he will let no one "enemy" or "friend," stand in his way. The cleverness of the Shibboleth trick also adds to a feeling that Jephthah's major drive is not love of fellow man. This story also allows the redactionist to make a theological and an historical point. Historically, it shows why one of the strongest individual tribes in Israel's history suddenly becomes impotent just before the coming of the monarchy.¹³ The story also allows for a quick example of the consequence of jealousy.

I can imagine, and empathize with, the Deuteronomist's frustration in trying to use the traditions surrounding Jephthah to make the point he was using the book of Judges to make. How do you make a character who is loving yet ruthless, worldly-wise, yet religiously and historically ignorant, self-centered yet responsible for a whole people, blindly faithful yet religiously irresponsible, to make a theological point about God's saving grace. I believe you do what the Deuteronomist seems to have done. You let both God's nature and Jephthah's character speak for themselves. You show the result of God's love and Jephthah's vow. For in understanding both, you will gain the insight that the Deuteronomist intended!

¹³ TOTC, 147.